JOHN SKELTON AND THE POLITICS OF THE 1520s

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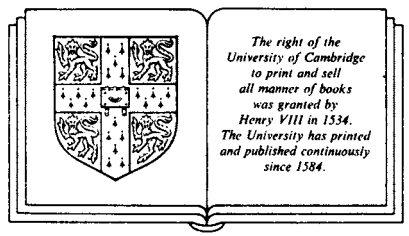

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INTRODUCTION

In 1521, John Skelton, a poet in his sixties, living in a tenement in the precincts of Westminster Abbey, put pen to paper. 'My name ys Parott', he wrote,[1]

> ... a byrd of Paradyse
> By Nature devysed of a wonderowus kynde,
> Deyntely dyeted with dyvers delycate spyce,
> Tyll Eufrates that flodde, dryvythe me into Ynde,
> Where men of that contre, by fortune me fynde,
> And send me to greate ladyes of estate;
> Then Parot moste have an almon or a date. (1–7)

Such was the unlikely beginning of one of the most intriguing campaigns of character assassination ever undertaken. For the parrot, Skelton's mouthpiece, was sent forth to lampoon and revile no less a figure than Thomas, Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Legate *a latere*, Archbishop of York and Lord Chancellor of England, the chief minister of Henry VIII. During the next five months the poem which Skelton had begun, *Speke, Parott*, was followed by five supplementary envoys which ridiculed, in particular, Wolsey's arbitration of the Calais Franco-Imperial conference of 1521[2] and, in general, the very way in which he ruled. Then, in 1522, *Speke Parott* made way for a more explicit satire, *Collyn Clout*, in which the poet, speaking through the persona of Collyn, a simple countryman, launched a barely concealed assault on what he declared to be the dangers inherent in Wolsey's dominance of Church and state, his monopoly of the King's ear and his personal vices. Finally, in the Autumn of 1522, Skelton wrote *Why Come Ye Nat To Courte?*, an open and vicious invective aimed directly at the Cardinal which accused him of every crime from perjury to treason and of every malady from megalomania to the pox. Then, suddenly, the attacks ceased and within months the poet was writing at Wolsey's behest, penning in subsequent poems lines of fulsome praise of his erstwhile target.[3]

[1] *Speke, Parott*, lines 1–7. All quotations and line references are from John Scattergood (ed.), *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems* (London, 1983).

[2] See chap. 3, below.

[3] *The Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell* (hereafter *The Garlande*) 1587–93, and *Howe the Douty Duke of Albany* (hereafter *The Douty Duke*) 523–31.

As source material for a study of the early 1520s these poems have never undergone serious scrutiny. Partly because of a lack of external evidence concerning the poet and partly, no doubt, owing to a greater interest in other aspects of Skelton's poems, critics and historians alike have largely allowed the poet's political comments to stand unquestioned. For those biographers and literary critics primarily interested in charting the development of the poet's 'art', it has usually been enough to analyse *how* the satires were written: to trace the literary precursors of a device such as a parrot narrator, from classical literature, through Jean Lemaire de Belges' *Epistres de l'amant verd*, to Skelton's use of the convention; to comment on the use of rustic orators in anti-clerical satires, or to speculate on the origins of the 'Skeltonic' verse-form. They have left unanswered the questions concerning exactly what it was that the poet used such vehicles to convey, and whether or not his purpose had any applicability to the political situation which he was satirising. For them it has been enough to assume that Skelton's description of his times, and particularly his apparent conception of Cardinal Wolsey, were accurate and thus required little examination.[4] Alternatively, historians who have used Skelton's testimony in their accounts *have* considered the comments made (although hardly in any depth) but have failed to pursue the underlying implications. For those commentators anxious to further the traditional view of the Cardinal's character and regime, it has usually been enough simply to insert into their argument a brief passage from *Why Come Ye Nat To Courte?* or *Collyn Clout* to the effect that Wolsey was proud, or corrupt, or tyrannical (or whichever other axe was at their grindstone at the time) as if this alone was sufficient confirmation of their theses.[5] Other writers, who have wished in some way to rescue the Cardinal's reputation from the worst calumnies of his critics, have cited the same passages as evidence of the prevalent popular misconceptions concerning the prelate's good works, or of the malicious attacks of an opposing faction.[6] In either case the poet's political position has been assumed as given. To the hostile historian he speaks for the common-sense values of the traditionalist courtiers, the no-

[4] S. E. Fish, *John Skelton's Poetry* (Yale, 1965); Nan Cooke Carpenter, *John Skelton* (New York, 1968); Ian A. Gordon, *John Skelton, Poet Laureate* (Melbourne and London, 1943); H. L. R. Edwards, *Skelton: The Life and Times of an Early Tudor Poet* (London, 1949); M. Pollet, *John Skelton, Poet of Tudor England*, trans. from the French by J. Warrington (Lewisberg, 1971). A. H. Heiserman, *Skelton and Satire* (Chicago, 1961), subscribes to a diametrically opposed but equally unhelpful opinion. For him Skelton's satires were entirely literary in their conception and relevance, and thus were hardly stimulated by their immediate political context at all. Indeed, for Heiserman, the historical Wolsey was merely an incidental figure in poems which were designed as general explorations of the satiric convention.

[5] R. Lockyer, *Tudor and Stuart Britain 1471–1714* (London, 1964), p. 41; N. Williams, *Henry VIII and His Court* (London, 1971), p. 52; S. Anglo, *Spectacle, Pageantry, and Early Tudor Policy* (Oxford, 1969), p. 238 and chaps. V–VII generally.

[6] A. F. Pollard, *Wolsey* (London, 1929).

bility and the populace at large, outraged at the disastrous quasi-innovations of the upstart; to the apologist he represents all that was inert and medieval about the Court and the people Wolsey had to overcome. At no point does either group stop to ask how sensible such stereotyping might be, an omission which does a grave disservice to our understanding of Wolsey's role in the politics of the early 1520s.

The purpose of this study is to make good that omission, to attempt to locate Skelton in his contemporary context, both politically and socially, and to offer some suggestions about the motivation behind his critical stance – or rather his series of critical stances, for, as was noted above, there was a series of clear shifts of attitude and approach even within the poet's 'anti-Wolsey' trilogy, shifts which will have to be examined closely if any valid comments are to be made concerning the satires. Simply to know what Skelton said is not enough. The Wolsey poems, beginning with the hostile satires of 1521–2 and continuing into the laudatory commissioned works of 1523, pose several crucial questions to the student concerned with their value as an historical source, whether for an analysis of Wolsey's character or for the political situation during his ascendancy. How accurate a reflection are they of perceptions of Wolsey and his governance? Does Skelton actually believe what he appears to be saying? And, if so, is he expressing a consensus, or simply the grievances or an individual or small group of malcontents? How perceptive are the poet's allegations? Did he enjoy a privileged position at Court from which to observe his target, or was his viewpoint merely that of an external observer of Court affairs? Immediately one approaches such questions more specific problems concerning the poet and his texts present themselves. First, and most obviously, why did Skelton write them? Why produce and circulate what appear to be suicidally dangerous writings? And, having done so, why clearly sign one's own name under each one, as Skelton did? And then, why abruptly cease such writings and begin to praise the former *bête noire* in subsequent poems? Why also did not Wolsey, when confronted with these texts (if indeed he was), act to stifle them as he had done in other cases, either by suppressing the poems or by imprisoning their author? Finally, how popular were the satires? Were they peddled at every street corner and quoted in every alehouse, or were they merely circulated among an intimate group of conspirators? And, in a wider context, does this imply that Wolsey was universally reviled in the 1520s, or that, if he had enemies, they were forced to work in secret, using covert means of expression?

It may well be that many of these questions can never be satisfactorily answered. But, in order to approach as close to an answer as the available evidence will allow, it will be necessary to rewrite some of the assumptions which underpin the accepted Skeltonic biography. In order to see how the

Wolsey satires came to be written, one needs, I should like to suggest, to understand the nature of Skelton's career up to their conception. Unfortunately, in any attempt to reach such an understanding, one is immediately faced with the major barrier to all Skeltonic biographical studies. For the known facts of the poet's life are fewer than those of almost any other major poet since Longland. The figure which history has bequeathed to us is thus skeletal in the extreme. But what contemporary records have failed to provide has been more than compensated for by the more or less fanciful assumptions of subsequent criticism, which has swathed the historical Skelton in layer upon layer of adhesive myth, until the original figure has been all but lost among the mythical accretion.

Maurice Pollet began his study of the poet's life and work with the laudable declaration: 'I considered Skelton's case impossible of solution except by the Cartesian method of systematic doubt, by passing through the sieve of criticism every document we possess.'[7] Despite the occasional stride in that direction however, the dictates of writing a biography for publication seem to have forced him to allow the skeleton to retain some of its mythical shrouds in order that a tolerable narrative might be produced from a small collection of largely mundane and occasionally maddeningly scrappy contemporary records. As the present study is under no such constraint to provide an entertaining narrative it should be possible to close the holes in Pollet's sieve a little further and, by a policy of systematic doubt applied to each aspect of the problem, to produce a more acceptable summary of Skelton's career and of his relationship to the political figures and events which he describes. That is not to say that one needs here to enter into a discussion of all the minutiae of a long biography; to do so would be both tedious and unhelpful to our present concern. The sum of the known facts, and a large amount of the mythical addition, can be found in H. L. R. Edwards' biography of the poet,[8] which, despite its shortcomings, remains the best account available. Our concern here is only with those aspects of the biography which are relevant to the production of the Wolsey poems, and those in which the accounts of the biographers are in need of substantial revision. It may well be that such a demythologising exercise might yield a merely negative net result, in that a few layers of mythical camouflage might be removed without being replaced by any more real clothing. But even this will be valuable in providing a small step towards a clearer picture, not only of Skelton, but also of Cardinal Wolsey, and of the Court and country during his ascendancy.

[7] Pollet, *Poet of Tudor England*, p. xii. [8] See note 4, above.